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ABSTRACT

A home based project serving special needs children 0 to 5 years old in a rural area developed a mothers' group designed to increase parents' self esteem, decrease their isolation, and provide more information about their child's development. An introductory section outlines general assumptions of the group and describes a sequence of activities to help parents become involved and build trust among group members. Motivating and restraining factors involved in group membership are considered. Leadership influences and techniques are suggested. Evaluation and scheduling concerns; activity plans used in the group to enhance parents' self esteem; parenting skills (including discipline, observation, listening, and preventive health measures); and nutrition competence are briefly examined. (CL)

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A Handbook for Helping Parents "Group"

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A HANDBOOK FOR HELPING PARENTS "GROUP"

Written by Catherine Bell
Cheryl Fernald
Sonja Ramsdell

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

		Page
	INTRODUCTION	1
Chapter I	GETTING TO KNOW YOU	2
Chapter II	GROUPING	8
Chapter III	FOLLOW THE LEADER	14
Chapter IV	KEEPING TRACK	18
Chapter V	DAY BY DAY	20
Chapter VI	ACTIVITY PLANS	24

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INTRODUCTION

We are home advisors with the Washington County Children's Program, a rural home-based early intervention program serving special needs children from 0-5.

Throughout our six years of experience, we have discovered that, though home visits are vital, in some cases they are not quite enough. This is mainly due to the isolation of our rural area and various environmental factors. Certain parents and children need outside stimulation and contact with others, apart from our home visits.

The concept for a mothers' group evolved as we made plans for a play group to focus on the children's social and communicative needs. It was decided that a mothers' group would serve a similar function for their parents. The work of the WCCP is based on the philosophy that parents are a child's best and most important "teachers", and we realized that these mothers could not fulfill their children's needs when so many of their own were unmet.

Through our observations on home visits, we identified the priority areas of: self-esteem, effective parenting, and nutrition. Our hope was to:

(1) support parents emotionally and build self-esteem
(2) act as an information exchange
(3) help improve parent-child relationships
(4) encourage parent participation

In most cases, the Children's Program worked in the home with a child and his or her mother. Fathers were not a part of our groups because of the area's culture. As a result, we speak to the experience of "mothers" only, and our choice of words reflects this. We hope, however, that our work will be adaptable and useful to any group of "parents", including fathers.

We would like to share with you the methods and madness with which we lead mothers' groups (8 in a 4-year period) in rural Washington County. You will be a party to our attempts to bring a little sunshine and enlightenment to some of "our mothers'" lives, and, consequently, our own.

Cheryl Fernald
Sonja Ramsdell

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Chapter 1

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

In working with any group, it is important to develop an environment of trust and support so that group members will feel safe interacting with each other. Sharing and learning more about each other is essential to alleviate the natural anxiety all people feel when entering a new group. We call this the involvement process.

A unique part of the WCCP mothers' groups has been the quality of involvement between leaders and mothers, and our comments here are based on the following assumptions:

1) that time spent on becoming involved (and it is a gradual process) is well-spent - is, in fact, a prerequisite for growth and learning.

2) that the involvement process should be consciously planned, taking into account each group's level of involvement.

   Each group is an entity in itself - has its own life and characteristics which must be gauged. Various common bonds may already exist, some members knowing each other or the group leader. This should all be taken into account when choosing activities.

   As a result of weekly home visits over the year, we had an understanding of each individual's personality and particular home environment. A basis of trust and caring existed at the onset of our group experience.

3) that the leader cares and wants to listen, and is willing to share her thoughts and feelings.

   Make an effort to let each group member know she is special and worthwhile to the group. In our groups, members had little confidence, and leaders attempted to point out all kinds of positive things - a red shirt on a grey day, a pretty hairdo, a cheerful attitude, a sensitive comment, delicious cookies donated for snack.

   It's up to the leader to guide, and yet participate openly in the whole process. You need to be relaxed about revealing yourself, so stay away from topics you're not comfortable with, or (better yet) admit your discomfort.

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Always go first and serve as a model by talking a lot. Use "I" and "me". Also, you may have to prompt a group member who lacks confidence (e.g., "I've noticed that you_____!").

4) that the involvement process is an on-going one, that of "staying" involved.

Activities should be used on a regular basis - as warm-ups or to move the group to a higher level of involvement. Many times the women enjoyed them so much that they were repeated "just for fun". Often repetition at a later session indicated to the mothers, "Hey, we've improved!".

5) that people "stay" involved in a group because it recognizes them, meets some of their needs, and is relevant to their experiences.

Home visits gave us a basis for determining the women's real needs and establishing a group format. In addition, we used needs assessments and interest inventories to gain insight into their likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses and incorporate them into the program. However, an accurate needs assessment must follow preliminary involvement, and be on-going. (See sample of our own "interest inventory" at the end of Chapter I.)

6) that details, such as physical setting, size of group, the security of a routine, etc. may also enhance involvement.

Regarding the physical and mental comfort of group members, we always try to ask ourselves, "Is everyone warm enough in this drafty church basement? Have people had their morning cup of coffee? Has cigarette smoking been discussed by the group and a policy established? Is the seating arrangement a barrier to open communication, eye contact, etc? (A tight circle of moveable chairs is best.) Do we need to break up into pairs?"

Involvement Activities (Listed from low to high level):

In order to begin to take risks and grow, group members need to know where they are now and what their strengths are. One of the best methods for building confidence and developing an atmosphere of trust is mutual self-disclosure.

There are many activities to help people "present" themselves - share how they feel, what they value, hope, and even dream. Following are some of the activities we've used. We've tried to give you an idea of how they worked, as we learned all this the hard way.

"Here's Where I Stand" Game:

Everyone clusters in the middle of a room. Explain that you are going to play a game which involves things they are interested in, i.e., food, colors, clothes, books, travel, emotions, etc. (You can add endlessly to this list.). Choose a topic, for instance, food, and point out 2-4 areas of the room, depending on group size. One area could be for all Italian food lovers, another for Chinese, and another for American. Explain that each one should go to the area which represents her favorite food. Do this with several other topics. Switch roles so group members can choose some topics and get to know you better.

Comments: We tried this the second time each of our groups met. The women laughed a lot and enjoyed coming up with their own topics. Also, the physical activity released a lot of tension.

It's a good on-going activity, as each time variations can be used and new things are revealed. Besides, it's fun!

The Name Game:

In a conversational way, ask these questions of group members. Finish with one person before moving on to the next.

What is your whole name?
How did you get it?
Were you named after someone?
Do you like your name?
Would you like to change your name?
What would you change it to?
Do you have any nicknames?
Have you ever had any nicknames?

Comments: This is a good game to use during the first session. At first people didn't want to talk about themselves, but they soon relaxed. It was interesting to note how much better we related to each other after the game, probably due to the fact we saw we had a lot in common.

The Question Game:

1. Tell us something you would especially like to do.
2. Tell us about a joyful experience you have had.
3. Tell us about a decision you have made that has affected your life.
4. Tell us about a successful experience that you have had.

Comments: This is a good follow-up to the name game. People really open up and tell a lot about themselves.

The leader should start this game and choose a verbal member of the group to follow her. Asking one question at a time and going all around the circle causes fewer problems and people are more eager to participate. We were able to learn something special about each group member, and they seemed to be more aware of their own value.

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Card Game:

Pass out index cards and a sheet of labels. Have each person write her name on the card, and 1-2 positive qualities she sees in each group member on the label (1 per person).

In turn, pass cards around the circle. Group members attach the appropriate label to each card and read aloud what they have written. It's important that everyone listens - shares in each person's "good" news.

Comments: We tried this activity once when our group was fairly new. It was very intimidating for some of the women. I had to take each one aside actually pointing out a positive quality for each of the other group members. This was awkward, but later gave me something to fall back on when someone needed further encouragement (e.g., "I remember your card saying you had a terrific sense of humor,", etc.).

Another drawback of doing this too early on, is the serious problem some women had with giving and receiving compliments (This has also proven to be an issue for much more sophisticated groups.).

Finally, it can be very intimidating to have to write when it doesn't come naturally. There was a real fear that they wouldn't be able to spell what they wanted to say, etc.

All these problems seem to be solved when there has been adequate time for involvement. Later on, this was a real self-esteem builder. We'd try it 2-3 times a year.

9

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Now, picture this!

You try out the new rolling barrel and get stuck inside.

drawings by Karyn Evrard

Background Readings:

Individualizing Parent Involvement - 3, Western States Technical Assistance Resource (WESTAR), 215 University District Bldg., 1107 N.E. 45th, Seattle, WA, 1979.

Just For You, Helen Steiner Rice, Inspirational Verses, Gibson Greeting Cards, Inc., Cincinnati, OH, 1963.

On Becoming A Person, Carl Rogers, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, MA, 1961.

Parent Involvement, Circle Preschool, The First Chance Project, 9 Lake Ave., Piedmont, CA, Alpha Plus Corp., 1977.

Resource Book for Class Discussions, Educator Training Center, 100 E. Ocean Blvd. #906, Long Beach, CA.

Tribes - A Human Development Process for Educational Systems, Jeanne Gibbs and Andre Allen, 166 Capicorn Ave., Oakland, CA, 1976.

100 Ways to Enhance Self-Concept in the Classroom - a handbook for teachers and parents, Jack Canfield and Harold G. Wells, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976.

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Interest Inventory

Number the following 1-5 according to priority. #1 is your first choice, #2 is your second, etc. Do each column.

Self-Esteem

_____ Feelings - how to interpret them
_____ Personal Appearance
_____ Creativity (list your own talents)
_____ Woman to Woman
_____ Field Trips

Nutrition

_____ Cooking
_____ Diet and You
_____ Your Child's Diet
_____ Nutrients
_____ Exercise

Effective Parenting

_____ Communication
_____ Limit Setting
_____ Your Child's Self-Esteem
_____ Quality vs Quantity Time
_____ Importance of the Family

Self-Knowledge

_____ Community Resources - for you and your child
_____ How to get Services - for your child in school
_____ Stages of Child Development
_____ Financial Assistance - for children with special needs
_____ Other

Fundraising Activities

_____ Soliciting Community Support - planning and talking to people
_____ Christmas Fair - making items and participating
_____ Rummage Sale/Penny Carnival
_____ Wreaths - green & cone
_____ Note Cards

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Chapter II

GROUPING

In making the decision to bring these women together in a group setting, we had to consider the motivating and restraining factors of joining a group, as well as such things as group size and cohesiveness. Also, we tried to anticipate problems that might arise. We wanted group "membership" to be a positive and supportive experience for these often unsure and hesitant young mothers.

What makes a group attractive to some potential members, and not to others? Through informal observations, we have found evidence of the following factors in all of our groups.

Motivating Factors:

1. Child has need
2. Support from others
3. Ability to set own goals
4. Potential for increasing self-esteem
5. Seeing degree of progress in child
6. Participating in child's program
7. Group leader's interest
8. Group leader's enthusiasm
9. Equality within group
10. Group has something to offer

Restraining Factors:

1. Geographical distance
2. Lack of understanding child's problem
3. Feeling of being overwhelmed by the problem
4. Fear of failure for child and/or mother
5. Fear of isolation from child
6. Fear of involvement
7. Conflict of interests
8. Having needs group can't meet
9. Personality conflicts

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We found a good size for our groups was a maximum of 10 members. Trust among group members and the leaders happens sooner than in a larger group. Also, seating arrangements are more workable, and contribute to involvement. We usually sit in a circle of chairs or, if we have work to do, around a table (then, no one can "hide out"). The main goal is to provide a comfortable atmosphere where members can participate freely.

Various and sundry problems will arise within any group. (See sample at end of Chapter II). All groups run the risk of some members forming cliques. Usually friends or people with the same interests will hang together. It's helpful for the leader to sit between friends, or ask members to rotate. This should be done very tactfully and only after the group has been going for some time. Another way to prevent the situation is to really work at getting all the members involved with each other.

In just about any group you will find a combination of silent and dominating members. One of us had a group in which no one spoke, which was a continuing problem. Another variation is that the more dominant members alienate the silent ones.

Never intimidate silent members by pushing them into the conversation, or by insisting they contribute if they are anxious. Simply, continue to look for opportunities to get their opinions.

If one or two members are dominating the conversation, and it is evident that other members would like to contribute, the leader should tactfully say, "I'd also like to hear what _____ has to say. _____, would you share some of your thoughts with us?" If the dominant member persists, state that perhaps she could share a few more minutes on that topic before moving on.

Whatever problems arise, be sure to let the entire group know you're glad they attended, and that they're essential to the group's success. Each person's self-concept is a determining factor in the degree of impact the group will have on her or him. You may want to periodically use the "Group Process Feedback Sheet" (See sample at chapter's end.) as an indicator of group involvement.

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Now, picture this!

Today, you plan to discuss the benefits of good nutrition as the main topic of your group. To open the discussion, you ask the mothers to help themselves to coffee and try out the snack you brought - a mixture of sunflower seeds, nuts, chocolate bits, and raisins.

Everyone peers suspiciously at the bowl. No one takes any out. "What's that?", they ask. You reply, "Sunflower seeds."

"Yuk! She's feeding us bird seed", someone says incredulously. "I'm not eating that mess", someone else pipes up.

"Not even for a chocolate chip?", you ask, stunned at the disgusted looks on everyone's faces. "Uh, uh. You won't catch me putting my hand in that bowl", comes the answer.

Now, on to your well-planned discussion of nutritious foods.

Background Readings:

Groups: Theory & Experience, Rodney W. Napier and Matti I. Gershenfeld, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1973.

A Leader's Guide to Exploring Parenting, DHEW Pub. No. (OHDS) 79-31137, Head Start Bureau, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Office of Human Development Services, U.S. Dept. of Health, Education and Welfare, Washington, D.C., 1978.

The New Professional: Introduction for the Human Services/Mental Health Worker, James G. Dugger, Brooks/Cole Publishing Co., Monterey, CA, 1975.

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Dealing with Common Problems*

1. The group does not seem to be interested in the topic of discussion.

   Possible Solutions:

   a. Call a break.
   b. Tell the group that they don't seem interested. Ask them why or what they could do to become more interested.
   c. See whether a few people are dominating. If so, try to involve others.
   d. Encourage the group to make a decision and go on to the next top...
   e. See whether everyone understands what is going on. Maybe the group has gotten off the track.

2. Someone is talking too much.

   Possible Solutions:

   a. Thank her for her remark and suggest that the group hear comments from others.
   b. If she continues to talk, tell her that she is keeping other people from having their chance to speak. Tell her that the sooner the others get a chance to speak, the sooner the group can give her another chance.
   c. If she stills keeps talking, ask her why she is not willing to give others a chance.
   d. Finally, ask the group to decide on what should be done.

3. Someone is shy and finds it difficult to contribute.

   Possible Solutions:

   a. Ask her what she thinks about the problem.
   b. Ask her for suggestions.
   c. Ask for her agreement or disagreement.
   d. Point out to the group that some people are finding it difficult to participate and ask the more talkative members if they couldn't do something to help others join in.

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4. The group is unable to reach a decision.

   Possible Solutions:

   a. Ask the group what to do since a decision hasn't been reached.
   b. Suggest that further discussion and thought are needed. Come back to the problem later on in the agenda.
   c. Ask the group if a compromise is possible.
   d. Call for a majority vote.
   e. Assign a committee to study the problem and recommend a solution at the next meeting.

5. Members are talking on the side while the main conversation is going on.

   Possible Solutions:

   a. Stop the main conversation and look at the members who are talking on the side. Ask if they are discussing something the whole group should know.
   b. Ask the group if they think it is best to have only one conversation going at one time.
   c. Ask one of the members talking on the side for her opinion on the main topic.
   d. If the side conversation continues, tell the members involved that they're distracting the rest of the group. Ask them to please stop.

6. Someone asks a question or makes a statement that is off the subject.

   Possible Solutions:

   a. Thank her for her comment but suggest that it be discussed at a later time.
   b. Ask her how her remarks are related to the agenda item under discussion.

From: The New Professional: Introduction for the Human Services/Mental Health Worker, by J.G. Dugger. Copyright 1975 by Wadsworth, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the publisher, Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, Monterey, CA

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Group Process Feedback Sheet*

Look at the circles. On the line below, write the number which shows how much you feel you are included in our group. You may want to jot down a few words which tell why you feel this way.

Number _____ shows how much I feel included

*from: A Leader's Guide to Exploring Parenting

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Chapter III

FOLLOW THE LEADER

Although there are many different theories regarding what makes a good leader, there are several things that stand out in our minds:

1. Know who you are.

"Taking stock" of yourself can be rewarding and painful. We began by reflecting on our thoughts, feelings, biases, and expectations regarding a variety of people and issues. We took a look at some of our own strengths and weaknesses. The next step was to get (and stay) in touch with our individual leadership styles (i.e., autocratic or democratic, etc?). Throughout this process we asked ourselves such questions as:

- Do I like structure or "playing it by ear"?
- What situations make me uncomfortable?
- What do I do best?
- How do I feel about the people in this group, and their needs?
- Do I have confidence in myself?

2. Know what a group needs.

Take a careful look at the make-up of your group (ages, personalities, receptiveness to change, needs, talents, etc.). Groups working on different tasks need different kinds of leadership. Some may want a close personal relationship with other members and the leader, while for others a more formal relationship works. In our case, the necessity of dealing with the women's emotional needs was a basic assumption from the start.

All objectives should be clearly stated and agreed upon by the group. Early on in our experience, one of us believed our objectives to be so important for the group, that she assumed the group would view them in the same way. This couldn't have been further from the truth, and she had to rethink her objectives in terms of what the group wanted and whether she could provide it. (This is how the needs assessment came into being!)

Finally and simply, the good leader balances her time and concern between group goals and individual needs.

3. Know if you have the skills to meet that group's needs.

Being a group leader is not easy. If you think it is, you could be getting in over your head by not clearly understanding the group's needs or how much you can give a group. It may be that the needs of a group are so great you could easily become "burned out" before any objectives are met. Difficult situations that warrant professional intervention may arise, or, in the extreme case, it may be inappropriate for a group to continue.

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Having a co-leader is considered by many to be essential for these reasons. A co-leader is someone to give you support, lend perspective, act as a sounding board, and share concerns regarding the group.

Be sensitive to the group and where it is, and clear about your goals and objectives. Within this framework, you must be willing to work at acquiring skills in: flexibility, listening, giving and receiving feedback, and modeling. Beyond this, your caring, unconditional positive regard will help determine how successful your group is.

Finally, we have found that the entire group is responsible for its success or failure. Your leadership skills are not the "crux of the matter".

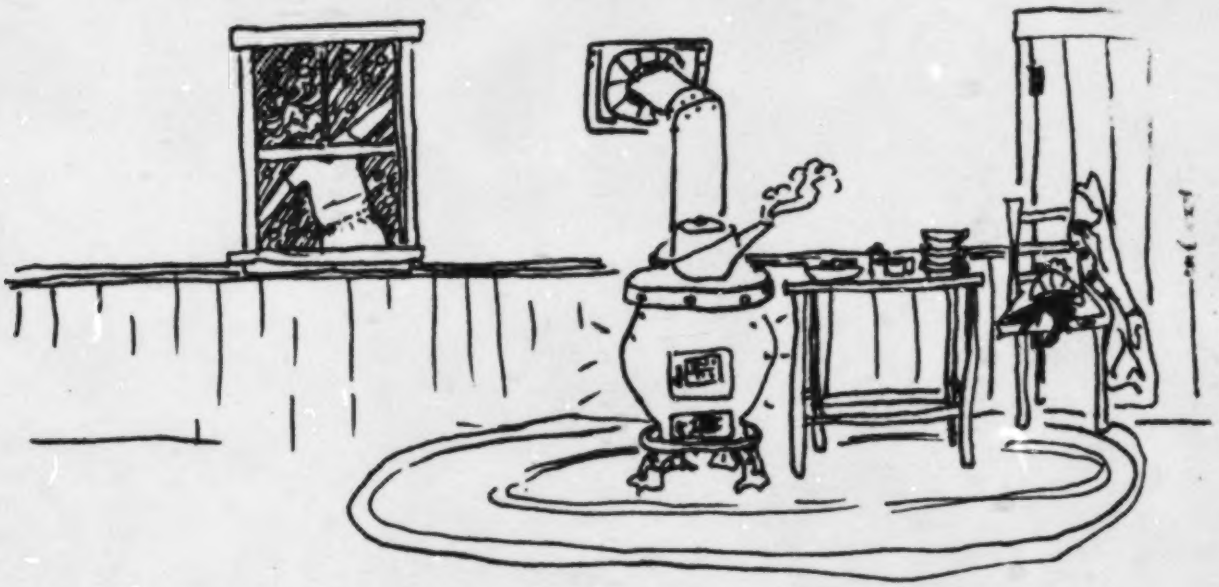
4. Know how to lead a discussion.

As discussions play a part in almost any group meeting, we'll include a few suggestions and methods we've found useful.

- Determine the goal of your discussion and make it clear to the group.
- Get participants talking to <u>each other</u>. When a question is directed at you, toss it back to the group. Ask, "Do you agree?", or, "What's your reaction to that?"
- Be willing to wait for others to respond - this means becoming comfortable with silence.
- Never comment on the "rightness" or "wrongness" or intelligence of an answer.
- Divide a large group into several, each one having a "recorder" who can later report discussion results to the entire group.
- Use "brainstorming" for a reticent group. The group tosses out ideas (nothing's too crazy), <u>all</u> of which are written down. Then, as a group, narrow, prioritize, and bring order to your list.
- Use Glasser's (<u>Reality Therapy</u>) "Define, personalize, and challenge" method. (See our sample list of questions at end of chapter.)
- Restate goals and summarize points raised in discussion. Add things that might have been missed.

Now, picture this!

Everything's set up and you're waiting for the mothers to arrive. The tea kettle is whistling and the parish hall is warming up after a frigid night. Suddenly, you remember something still in the car and dash outside to get it (without your coat). The door locks shut behind you.



Background Readings:

Groups: Theory & Experience, Rodney W. Napier and Matti I. Gershenfeld, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1973.

A Leader's Guide to Exploring Parenting, DHEW Pub. No. (OHDS) 79-31137, Head Start Bureau, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Office of Human Development Services, U.S. Dept. of Health, Education and Welfare, Washington, D.C., 1978.

The New Professional: Introduction for the Human Services/Mental Health Worker, James G. Dugger, Brooks/Cole Publishing Co., Monterey, CA, 1975.

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Parent Effectiveness Training, Dr. Thomas Gordon, New American Library, Inc., N.Y., 1970.

Resource Book for Class Discussions, Educator Training Center, 100 E. Ocean Blvd. #906, Long Beach, CA.

Woman to Woman, Lucienne M.C. Lanson, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., N.Y., 1975.

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"Define, Personalize & Challenge" Discussion Format

Topic: What is a parent?

Define

1. What are qualities of a good parent? A bad parent?
2. What are some basic tasks parents fulfill?
3. What are some non-basic tasks parents should fulfill?
4. What else is a parent, besides a parent?
5. What are some needs that a parent has?

Personalize

1. What would you do differently from what your parents did?
2. What would you do the same as your parents?
3. What do you find most difficult in being a parent?
4. What do you enjoy most about being a parent?
5. What do you feel you gained from your parents raising of you?

Challenge

1. Is "parenting" an art or a skill?
2. What could we do to most improve our society's parenting abilities?
3. What would help parents most in raising their children?
4. What should children be getting from the child/parent relationship?
5. Can parents be good and bad at the same time?

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Chapter IV

KEEPING TRACK

One weakness of our original groups was the lack of an appropriate tool for evaluating progress. As a result, we relied on ongoing informal observation and journal keeping. After each session, changes observed in each woman were recorded (i.e., appearance, interaction, body language, group participation, etc.).

Circle time, held at the end of each session, provided an ongoing basis for observation. Here mothers and their children got together to sing songs, play games, etc. Mother - child interaction was enhanced, and we all closed on a positive note.

Recently, we have tried out several forms (administered at the beginning and end of each group's life) to learn what changes may have occurred and whether needs are being met. Variations of Stanley Coopersmith's "Behavior Rating Form", "Self-Esteem Inventory", and "Mother's Questionnaire" (Antecedents of Self-Esteem) were useful and appropriate to our groups.

These combined methods of evaluation and observation should give helpful insight into attitudes and behavior within a group, and enable you to determine if changes in a mother's self-concept are having an effect on how she relates to her child.

By the end of each group experience, we are able to see some clear and encouraging evidence of growth. In one group, which functioned at a low level, there were dramatic changes in physical appearance and verbal participation. For example, one woman had her hair styled, and started wearing make-up and jewelry. In another higher level group (where women had fewer problems with self-esteem), there was a new out-going interest in the community. All members got involved in WCCP fund raising activities, such as a Penny Carnival and making cone wreaths and Christmas cards for sale.

These gains have apparently been lasting. We're fortunate to be able to see for ourselves when we bump into these women on the street, or hear through the grapevine that several have joined a local parent cooperative nursery school.

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Now, picture this!

The mothers do exercises...with your body!

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Chapter V

DAY BY DAY

Our mothers' groups were held every week, excepting school vacations and snow storms, and got started anywhere from October to December and met until June.

The women, in most cases, arranged their own transportation, and attendance was regular and enthusiastic - even in our rural area. Apparently the women wanted and needed this time, and their children were provided for, so they made every effort to be present. One woman even hitchhiked. However, there was a group where the leader had to provide transportation for all five women - as none of them had driver's licenses. Needless to say, attendance at this group was excellent!

A large proportion of parent programs have reported a problem with attendance. Though this has not been the case with our mothers' groups, we'll include a few suggestions that have proved useful for others.

1) Try holding an introductory meeting so reluctant people can "sample your wares". Send out invitations and follow up by phone. Someone who has had involvement with the family should be in on the entire process. (See sample.)

2) At that first meeting, some types of needs assessment should be completed and a preliminary outline of topics arranged. Parents will know what to expect from the start and that attendance will be worth their while.

3) A time frame (e.g., 6 weeks, re-evaluate, continue or disband group), schedule, and "housekeeping" rules need to be established (i.e., if sick..., if snowing..., etc.).

4) Finally, individual agreement forms to be signed by those who wish to participate help firm up a commitment. Providing transportation and child care also does wonders for attendance. (See sample.)

In order to bring the group closer together, a variety of special, "just for fun" events are held throughout its life.

- going for coffee and donuts once a month
- a Christmas party, where the women exchange gifts and pastries
- a pot-luck picnic before summer recess
- an outing to a lake or camp with the children

In conclusion, devote some thought to the end of your group. "Coming to a close" is part of the group process and members should always be prepared. Also, plan ahead for any follow-up activities.

Daily Schedule

We noted that the women enjoyed the structure of a set daily routine. On occasions where an activity ran late, we were carefully reminded and brought back on schedule.

8:30 - 9:30 - Set up

9:30 - 9:45 - Share coffee and thoughts

Group leader shares some of her pleasures or problems with the group, encouraging members to join in interesting discussions..

9:45 - 10:00 - Exercise

Having consulted with a physical fitness expert, group leaders establish a simple exercise program. The mothers add exercises that work for them.

10:00 - 10:10 - Make children's snacks

After the first session, each woman signs up on a posted chart to contribute something (i.e., coffee, juice, peanut butter, etc.). The women prepare and take snacks to the children, as well. (At this point we get a report on how the kids are doing!).

10:10 - 10:45 - ACTIVITY

Activity plans are prepared in advance and are based on information received from the needs assessment. Time is always allowed for questions and review.

10:45 - 11:00 - Circle time (including children)

Leaders, mothers and children come together in a large circle. The mothers hold or touch their children. Simple songs are sung - some with motions, and some which relate to specific parts of the body.

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Monthly Plan

Here's a variation we've used with more recent groups. We still follow the "daily schedule", but all four weekly activities are related in terms of an overall theme (e.g., nutrition).

Week 1 - Film & discussion

Week 2 - Field trip

Week 3 - Guest speaker & discussion

Week 4 - Fund raising activity

Now, picture this!

The snack-time with no snack and eight adult people programmed for goodies at 10 o'clock.

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Dear Parent:

We would like to form a parents' group based on your needs.

We are holding an introductory meeting on Monday, December 15, at 7:00 p.m. at the Washington County Children's Program, 80 Main Street, Machias. This will be a "get acquainted" session and a time for you to decide what you would like to do, learn about, or discuss during these meetings. The home advisor or therapist working with your child will be at this meeting.

Please come and meet some new people and share your ideas!

We will contact you to see if you have any questions or transportation needs. Our phone number is _____.

Sincerely,

Agreement Form

Date: _____

I am interested in attending the WCCP parent group meetings and understand that it is important for me to be present at all six (6) sessions.

_____

Parent Signature

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Chapter VI

ACTIVITY PLANS

For parents to succeed as their child's "most important teachers", they must first feel some success as individuals. Our activity plans were geared to young mothers whose needs were great. Of top priority were 1) self-esteem, 2) effective parenting, and 3) nutrition.

Our challenge was to present these women with sessions that were informative and involving, yet not intimidating. We hoped to help each woman develop some of the confidence and motivation necessary for growth and change, and see that there are choices and alternatives in all our lives.

We include activity plans that have been used successfully by a variety of groups during the last four years. We hope you will adapt our format and plans to more sophisticated groups, and those including fathers.

Finally, at whatever level a group is operating, we believe it's important to build positive self-esteem and have some fun. Specific information or skills will have more meaning and value as a result.

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Self-Esteem Activity Plan: Singing

Objectives: - Have fun.
- Experience the joy and peace singing can bring.
- Make cooperative effort.

Materials: Guitar, poster board, magic marker.

Content:

1. Introduce community member who will lead the group in singing. (A guitar, or other instrument certainly adds to the effect.) Allow time for just listening and requests. Encourage the group to keep time with the music by clapping hands or tapping feet. Note: the women had previously been informed of session content.

2. Then, to encourage group participation, hold up cards printed with the words of familiar songs. Choose happy songs to create a friendly, warm atmosphere.

3. Throughout, comment on how music can create a mood, and emphasize the need for fun and enjoyment in a person's daily routine. Point out that music is enjoyed universally - that it is a link to others.

4. Discuss how music (no matter how simple the form) is something to be shared with your child.

Evaluation:

Try to use only speakers that you have heard and know are good. (Whenever possible use parents as speakers.)

Each woman requested that this activity be repeated - commenting on what fun it was. They left feeling "high" - laughing and humming as they filtered out of the room at the end of the session.

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Self-Esteem Activity Plan: Facials

Objectives:
- Enhance personal appearance.
- Notice personal attributes.
- Receive compliments comfortably.
- Feel worthy of compliments.

Materials: Poem, "People are Gifts" (-anonymous), mirrors, washcloths, towels, wash basins, make-up remover, facial mask, skin freshener, cotton balls, variety of make-up.

Content:

1. After reading the poem "People are Gifts", emphasize that everyone has something special to contribute to home, friends, and community. Lead into a discussion where something unique about each group member's talent and abilities is pointed out.

2. Discuss the importance of feeling good about yourself - how enhancing your personal appearance can affect your whole outlook on life.

3. Ask women to "volunteer" for facials. (Check for any allergies to cosmetics.) Have each do her own, while someone demonstrates use of various cosmetics. (In this case, the group leader had attended several make-up demonstrations.) Throughout, comment on the special attributes of each woman (nice eyes, hair, mouth, etc.).

4. After the facials, have each woman choose an item of jewelry, soap or make-up from a selection on display (These were donated by the W.C.C.P. staff.).

Evaluation:

Although some of the mothers were hesitant at first, the more assertive women encouraged the others to participate. Some were actually not familiar with their mirror images, but became increasingly fascinated as they applied their make-up after the facial. Each commented on her own make-up preferences, and how the facial made her face feel. They also exchanged compliments regarding their appearances. The overall atmosphere changed from hesitancy to excitement.

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Self-Esteem Activity Plan: How We Communicate

Objectives: - Become aware of communication skills.

Materials: Magic markers, posterboard, ideas and participation from trained counselor.

Content:

1. Counselor begins session by drawing a picture of a basket on a large sheet of posterboard. She briefly discusses how everyone has many daily opportunities to communicate with others, and portrays the basket as the "catch-all" that makes up communication.

2. She asks the group for skills we all use when communicating with someone: eye contact, listening, waiting, facial expressions, posture, tone of voice, emotional involvement of topic, distance from other person, etc. After listing these, the counselor briefly explains the importance of each.

3. The counselor and group leader demonstrate a typical conversation. While one talks, the other listens. The listener gives "feed-back" (e.g., "I think I heard you say _____."). The speaker indicates if feed-back is accurate by saying, "Yes, that's correct", or "No, I didn't say that". If "Yes", the listener earns the right to talk.

4. In this format, give each group member a chance to listen, interpret, and talk. Discuss anything of interest (hobbies, children, being a parent, working, cooking, etc.).

Evaluation:

This particular activity was difficult for some of the shy women. One refused to participate. However, the counselor was able to gauge the strengths and weaknesses of the women, and could give us helpful advice in terms of future sessions. This activity was also good for purposes of self-awareness and evaluation, theirs and ours.

Pantomime and role-playing of hypothetical situations were introduced in later group sessions, and proved to be less threatening.

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Self-Esteem Activity Plan: Making Toys

Objectives:
- Stimulate creative abilities.
- Enhance confidence.
- Strengthen communication and cooperative efforts.
- Be successful.

Materials: Sewing machine, felt material, thread, rick-rack, buttons, glue, puppet patterns, scissors, communication activity sheets.

Content:

1. Display a variety of handmade puppets as samples. Allow each woman to choose material and accessories to make a "puppet personality" for her child. Guide group in pinning and cutting puppet patterns. Those experienced in using the sewing machine assist in sewing puppet sides together.

2. Praise each woman's unique puppet design, encouraging an exchange of compliments.

3. Give each woman a hand-out instructing her how to talk to her child using puppets, and listing puppet-related activities. Suggest that mothers practice using the puppet to become comfortable with it.

4. Model how to use puppets with a child.

Evaluation:

The women had been informed in advance of session content. It was difficult for some women to believe they had any creative abilities, or skill to make a toy for their child. The more assertive women did encourage the reluctant ones to try.

To make an inexpensive yet useful toy for their children was exciting. Positive reinforcement for a mother's efforts resulted when her child accepted the puppet with much enthusiasm -- "a puppet Mom made herself!". There were comments such as, "I didn't think I could make one, but it came out nice."

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Self-Esteem Activity Plan: Acknowledging Feelings

Objectives:
- Identify feelings and emotions.
- Verbalize these feelings and emotions.
- Recognize that other family members (particularly the child) have feelings and emotions.

Materials: The Language of Feelings by David Viscott, skits of hypothetical situations, input from a family counselor

Content:

1. To heighten each woman's awareness of her own thoughts and feelings, ask them to be specific about how they're feeling "right now".

2. Give each woman a hypothetical situation in which she and several other mothers role-play. Center the situations around parent-child interactions, with each choosing a part she wants to play. The group leader also role-plays, while the resource person observes and provides necessary feedback.

3. After each role-play, discuss what happened, and how each participant feels about it. Consider alternatives and possible consequences.

Evaluation:

For this particular session and several others preceding it, a resource person trained in family counseling helped prepare the content.

This was a very useful activity. It gave each member a chance to begin to identify her emotions. The women discussed their roles, and appeared to be freer in expressing feelings in the hypothetical situations.

Suggested Topics:

Giving and Receiving Compliments

Listening

Importance of Affection

Pantomiming Feelings

Positive Thinking

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Effective Parenting Activity Plan: Talk, Look & Listen

Objectives:
- Introduce listening skills.
- Provide specific language-building activities.
- Introduce positive reinforcement.
- Strengthen observational skills.

Materials: Handouts: "Talk & Listen - A Guide for Parents", Division of Home Economics, Federal Extension Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and "Language Tips", Parent Involvement, Circle Preschool, The First Chance Project.

Content:

1. Emphasize the importance of communicating with children. Make the point that communication involves not only talking, but listening. Explain the term "body language".

2. Review handouts, and ask for ways in which group members can use these activities. Interpret the pictures used in "Talk & Listen" handout.

3. After graphically describing an everyday encounter between parent and child, discuss what the group has "heard" - the positive and negative communication techniques used. (Tapes from S.T.E.P. may also be used for this.). Then consider the possible consequences of such an interaction.

4. Distribute language activity sheets (e.g., singing or rhythm games, water play, cooking, etc.) for each woman to use with her child. Have each woman try one activity and report at the next group session. Suggest that they have a special daily sharing time with each child.

Evaluation:

The women were happy to get the handouts. However, the success of this activity depended on the amount of group participation in the discussion, and this was not a popular format with these women.

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Effective Parenting Activity Plan: Building Self-Esteem In Children

Objectives:
- Focus on children's positive attributes.
- Enhance parent/child interaction.
- Look at rewards for both parent and child when child feels good about himself.

Materials: Paper, pencils, poem "Children Learn What They Live" by Dorothy Nolte.

Content:

1. Emphasize that we all like to receive comliments and be recognized for our contributions - that positive input from people important to us is necessary. Draw a parallel between adult's and children's needs, and point out that what we say to children can affect how they feel about themselves.

2. Read "Children Learn What They Live" by Dorothy Nolte, and contrast the negative approach to children (criticism, hostility, ridicule, fear, and shame) with the positive approach (encouragement, acceptance, recognition, honesty, security, and friendliness).

3. Put up a large sheet of paper. Ask how ridicule might affect a child, and write answers on the paper. Then, discuss some of the positive ways to relate, and the effect these have on a child's self-esteem.

4. End the session by asking each woman to decide on one thing she can do or say to enhance her child's self-esteem. Briefly reiterate the message of "Children Learn What They Live".

Evaluation:

This activity is for advanced groups, or should be done after much involvement. The women opened up about the negative things they had experienced as children, and how these affected them (their lack of self-confidence, etc.). They talked about how they felt when people made callous remarks, and how their children must feel when similar remarks are made to them.

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Effective Parenting Activity Plan: Discipline vs. Punishment

Objectives: - Determine the difference between discipline and punishment.
- Focus on positive reinforcement.

Materials: S.T.E.P. Handbook, "Discipline vs. Punishment" handout from Glasser (Reality Therapy), large white paper

Content:

1. Begin the session by asking the group what the difference between discipline and punishment is. Go over each statement on the handout, encouraging discussion.

2. Give some reasons for children's misbehavior, based on the S.T.E.P. handbook. Brainstorm the topic with the group (see "discussions", Chapter 3).

3. Explain S.T.E.P. techniques for reinforcing positive behavior in children. Analyze personal experiences from the group in terms of positive reinforcement. Role play may also be used if the group is comfortable with it.

Evaluation:

This activity can involve several sessions. The concept of "positive reinforcement" may be new information for many parents, and two or three sessions may be needed to acquaint them with the benefits for both parent and child.

Positive reinforcement became a part of our interaction. We made the point that change is not easy, and that nothing of lasting benefit happens over night. "Consistency" was a key word.

This is an involving activity. We found that some women could look back on their childhood experiences and relate how this did, or did not, apply to them, and how alternatives using positive reinforcement might have helped.

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Effective Parenting Activity Plan: Observing Your Child

Objectives: - Increase awareness of observation skills.
- Understand that children are little "people" with needs.

Materials: Lesson plans prepared by group leader.

Content:

1. Assign simple lesson plans, based on increasing the mothers' observation skills, to be done by each mother and her child during the week.

2. At next meeting, ask how they spent their time, how their children spent time, and what they liked to do best with their children. Discuss the importance of carefully observing your children.

3. If no two-way mirror is available, rotate so that mothers can observe their children in the play group. When warmer weather comes and the children are outside, mothers may observe children from the window. Pick out a certain skill in each child and ask the mother if he or she does it at home. Center conversation around the child's interests and play activities.

4. Make home visits to see if the lesson plan from the group carries over into the visit. Note progress and ask open-ended questions requiring specific observations by the mother.

5. Make a chart listing each mother's name. Give each woman a sticker when she has tried an activity.

Evaluation:

A lot of involvement should be established before this activity is tried. This will help ensure that each woman is comfortable enough to relate to new skills, and recognize how effectively she has incorporated them into her daily routine.

This built confidence in the women, but required a lot of the leader's time in getting to know each one well. The chart was very successful and gave the women incentive to be prepared for the next session.

As home visits were already going on, such follow-up was not a real hardship.

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Effective Parenting Activity Plan: Preventive Health Measures

Objectives:
- Encourage regular checkups.
- Introduce importance of audiological screening.
- Become familiar with local health officials.

Content:

1. Introduce the public health nurse, who covers the residential area of those in the group.

2. Nurse demonstrates the audiometer with which she will test their children's hearing. (All mothers had previously consented to this test.) She then explains her job and talks about other local health officials, emphasizing the importance of regular checkups.

3. Have each woman watch while the nurse tests her child. Results are discussed first with the mother and then, if she so desires, with the group leader.

4. Follow-up recommendations given by the public health nurse on home visits.

Evaluation:

This was a good awareness session. Most women were not familiar with local resources, or with the importance of hearing screenings. If a child was found to have a possible hearing problem, the nurse and group leader had to be sensitive and tactful with the mother. Generally, only a recommendation to have further testing by an audiologist was given.

You must be willing to make commitment to follow-up on recommendations, or secure people who will. Of course, in some cases, only a phone call to the mother is necessary. In others, more involvement on our part is required, i.e., making contact for mother, transportation, etc.

Suggested Topics:

TV - Pro's & Con's for Your Child

Observation Skills

First Aid

Body Language

Child Development

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Nutrition Activity Plan: Counting and Burning Off Calories

Objectives:
- Understand calorie requirements, and nutritious vs. empty calories.
- Recognize high-calorie and low calorie foods.
- Learn how to burn off calories.

Materials: Book of Beauty by Diane Von Furstenberg, Downeast Health Services booklet - "So You're Really Serious About Losing Weight"

Content:

1. Ask each woman to think of several fattening foods. Discuss how to tell whether or not a food is fattening. (The conclusion should be "calories".)

2. Explain that a "calorie" is the heat-producing or energy-producing value of a food, and discuss how certain foods give us energy. Note that most of us consume more calories than we need - an average woman needs only about 1800 calories a day and exercise for her body to use food efficiently.

3. Consider the issue of taste vs. good nutrition. Just because something tastes good, it isn't necessarily good for you - usually the foods that taste good are higher in calories.

4. Give a "for fun" quiz. For example, which activity burns off the most calories? Walking or swimming, making a bed or climbing stairs, riding a bike or dancing? Lead into a discussion of the importance of exercise. Many of the women probably get no daily exercise, so set up exercise programs that will fit their routines.

5. Read excerpts from the Book of Beauty relating to diet, nutrition, value of foods, and exercise.

Evaluation:

The session encouraged some of the women to change their eating habits in order to lose weight. Some began exercise programs including their children, while another brought various exercises to share with the group. There was interest in the fact that less strenuous exercises could burn off a lot of calories.

Later on we gave a quiz on the subjects of nutritious vs. non-nutritious foods, empty calories, etc. Most of the mothers could correctly choose the nutritious foods and explain why they were important in our daily diets.

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Nutrition Activity Plan: Nutritious vs. Non-Nutritious Foods

Objectives: - Become familiar with nutritious, as opposed to non-nutritious foods.
- Realize that all foods in the grocery stores are not nutritious.

Materials: Food index cards

Content:

1. Main topics of the session are: meal planning, balancing the meal, shopping for and cooking the meal. Ask the group to think about what comes to mind when "good" and "bad" food is mentioned, and share your thoughts.

2. Discuss fresh vs. canned, preserved, "natural", and dried foods.

3. Give each woman a stack of index cards (with pictures of food on them) to be sorted into "good" and "bad" food piles. After the cards are separated, compare cards and discuss your reasons for placing certain foods in particular categories.

Evaluation:

A few women were reluctant to participate, as they were unsure about the nutritional value of some foods. They placed foods that tasted good in the nutritious pile and very nutritious foods in the "bad" pile, due to their dislike of certain foods. When the activity was repeated, we were able to be more specific. Slowly the mothers gained knowledge of nutritious foods.

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Nutrition Activity Plan: You Are What You Eat

Objectives: - Focus on the physical effects foods have on a person.
- Draw attention to nutritious vs. non-nutritious foods.

Materials: A hand-out prepared by the group leader, index cards with pictures of foods, Diane Von Furstenberg's Book of Beauty

Content:

1. Hand out sheet which discusses the importance of "good health" to life - your energy, emotions and body. Stress that good nutrition is a prerequisite for good mental and physical health. Other topics of discussion are diets, foods your body needs, nutritional habits, and why we eat.

2. On a list at the bottom of the hand-out, have the women check off foods they eat frequently (i.e., potato chips, candy, milk, fruit, meat, etc.).

3. Have each woman note if she is satisfied with her food habits, body, and health. Then, as a group, discuss the things she would like to change, giving suggestions. At the next meeting, report as to whether or not the suggestions were helpful.

4. Play a game using cards with pictures of foods. Each woman has a card with a specific food on it taped to her back. She turns her back to the group, while the group describes the color, category, texture of the food until she can correctly guess it.

Evaluation:

This session was repeated several times, mainly because the group really enjoyed it. There was little carry over in the home, but they did start to change their diets, and their knowledge of nutrition began to grow. With our help, one mother added more fruits, cheeses and meats to her child's diet, and actually noted changes in his behavior. She also made a list of nutritious snacks to eat instead of chips, candy, gum, etc.

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Nutrition Activity Plan: Basic Food Groups

Objectives: - Introduce the basic food groups.
- Explain why a person needs a variety of foods.
- Give a guide to good eating habits.

Materials: Extension Service pamphlets

Content:

1. Ask each woman to list the foods which should be eaten every day.

2. Hand out food charts, which state necessary daily servings, important nutrients, and their major physiological functions (charts donated by local Extension Service).

3. Discuss the foods in each group, and where each food can be found in the local grocery stores.

4. Discuss maintaining a balanced diet, and share recipes using the various food groups.

Evaluation:

As they had such strong food habits, some of the women could not contribute much to the group. Lecturing or discussing didn't seem effective.

Something should be added to "spice" the topic. Access to a kitchen was possible, so we tried cooking a few times, which was very successful. This is such an important topic, "no holds should be barred".

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Nutrition Activity Plan: Common Sense Weight Loss

Objectives: - Encourage sound eating habits.
- Encourage women who have expressed a desire to lose weight.

Materials: Book of Beauty by Diane Von Furstenberg

Content:

1. Begin the session by asking each woman how she feels about her eating habits (i.e., whether she feels good, guilty, etc. and why).

2. Then, share ideas on losing weight (they'll come up with some really good suggestions).

3. Read the 12 suggestions from the Book of Beauty, discussing each and applying them to your own daily routines.

4. Join the women in a weight loss program. This will have an effect on their attitudes and encourage them to keep trying. Stress exercise, plenty of rest, meats, fruits, milk and vegetables as being essential to the daily "diet".

Evaluation:

This session was a result of real interest and concern with weight loss. Several of the women (including us) applied "common sense weight control" to their daily routines. Some persisted in their weight loss programs, and group members helped with more suggestions. There was definite positive feedback for those whose suggestions were acted upon and a supportive atmosphere developed.

Suggested Topics:

Mind and Body

Creativity in Cooking

Reading Food Labels

"Sugar Blues"

Economics of Eating Right

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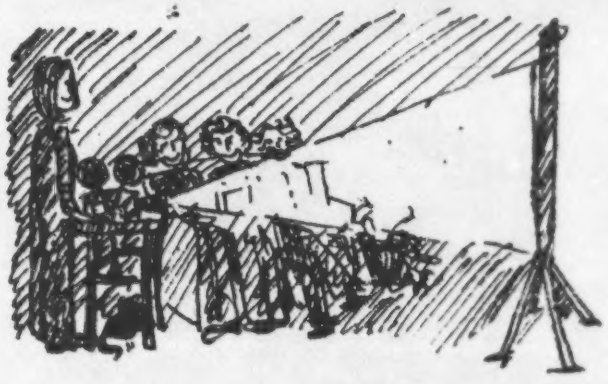
Now, picture this!

You ordered some filmstrips on child development to show the group. They arrived late and you didn't get a chance to preview them. You soon learn -- as you show them to the group -- they are highly technical in nature and way above everyone's head, including your own. Afterward, everyone wants to know what this word or that theory meant. You don't have the foggiest idea, and wonder whether to fake it or admit your ignorance. You gulp and admit it.



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